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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 001976

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION SUPPORTS IMPROVED BILATERAL TIES,
NON-MILITARY ASSISTANCE IN IRAQ

REF: ZAGREB 01936

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Frank for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

1. (U) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: As she did in her meetings with President Stjepan Mesic and PM Ivo Sanader (septel), A/S Beth Jones stressed the importance of Croatia's role in NATO integration and stability in the region when she met November 11 with Social Democratic Party (SDP) president Ivica Racan. A/S Jones also asked for opposition support of an Article 98 agreement and Croatia's expanded involvement in international military actions, explaining that our bilateral relationship will grow as Croatia participates more in multilateral actions. She highlighted actions Croatia could undertake to remove barriers to Euro-Atlantic integration, such as the capture of ICTY fugitive Ante Gotovina.

2. (C) The former prime minister said the SDP supports strong U.S.-Croatia relations whether the party is in government or in the opposition. Racan expressed worry about the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) government's handling of the EU integration agenda. He said he would consider ways the SDP as the largest opposition party could contribute to improving relations with the U.S., but stopped short of endorsing Article 98 or troops to Iraq. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

ASSISTING IN IRAQ, BUT WITHOUT COMBAT BOOTS

3. (C) Racan defended Croatia's role in the GWOT, particularly during the SDP coalition government (in power from 2000-2003), when Croatia decided to send troops to support operations in Afghanistan even before the U.S. asked. When he mentioned Croatia signing the Vilnius statement, he motioned toward his then-FM, Tonino Picula, sitting at his side. "This is the Foreign Minister who was almost hung," he said. According to Racan, the Vilnius statement sparked a fierce public reaction that his government underestimated, as Croatsians still recovering from war spoke out against sending troops outside their country's borders.

4. (C) The SDP supports non-military assistance to the effort in Iraq, according to Racan, and his government considered some options a year ago. While he didn't directly oppose contributing forces under UNSCR 1546 for UN security during election preparations, he said he could not foresee a decision in which Croatian troops would go to Iraq. On Article 98, Racan noted that during his government, the opposition (the now-ruling Croatian Democratic Union - HDZ) linked the issue to the ICTY, supporting an Article 98 agreement with the U.S. as justification for their opposition to cooperation with the ICTY.

INTEGRATION, PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE HDZ GOVERNMENT

5. (C) Racan said he was worried about the dramatic drop in public support for EU and NATO membership (now both below 50 percent) since the HDZ took power in December 2003, saying it could seriously limit the GoC's maneuvering room in EU negotiations. He attributed the dip to the HDZ's tendency to blame every tough decision on international pressure rather than presenting reforms as in Croatia's interest. He claimed this is the price the country pays for a HDZ government pursuing policies that its voter base does not support. Next week, the opposition will propose a set of principles in Parliament that Croatia should stand on in EU negotiations, as the GoC has not put forward any.

6. (C) According to Racan, internal HDZ opposition to reform has kept the Sanader government from advancing reform legislation. He also cited the conflict-of-interest scandal surrounding FM Miomir Zuzul (reftel) as damaging to Croatian credibility within the EU.

"IT'S GOOD TO BE THE OPPOSITION"

7. (C) COMMENT: Racan and his party seem content to sit back and let the HDZ pursue essentially the same pro-EU/NATO agenda the SDP government pursued. According to Racan, the current government's work on integration has helped temper

European skepticism about the HDZ and Croatia in general. And while SDP strategists fear the HDZ government will leave important reforms left undone, some issues, such as Tudjman-era nationalism and ICTY cooperation, can only be resolved under a HDZ government. END COMMENT.

18. (U) A/S Jones cleared this cable.
FRANK

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